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Anomic Bonds between Laypeople and Hijras in Gujarat, India

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to examine the anomic bonds between *hijras* of Gujarat, who renounced their social positions to live as devotees of the Hindu Goddess *Bahucharā*, and those who live in the ordinary, mundane world and have a new-born baby. The hijras have been represented by gender studies as an exemplar of the 'third gender' in non-Western society, though no such consistent representation or social niche exists in India. Most hijras are born and raised as male, but they subsequently renounce their traditional familial and societal relations, and present themselves as female through various methods, including transvestism and castration. However, their altered appearance does not grant them the same status as women; instead, they straddle between gender boundaries, existing at the gateway to a sacred sphere where their ambiguity is understood and accepted. Hijras are traditionally invited to assist in important transitional life events such as childbirth. Childbirth is a liminal phase that is believed to endanger babies, mothers and their families, and hijras are required to dispel evils and bestow blessings in order to overcome the vulnerability. In this paper, I will explore the meaning of vulnerability attributed to childbirth and anomy of childbirth where hijras and laypeople come to interact.

KEYWORDS: Anomie, renunciation, liminality, childbirth, vulnerability

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on *hijras* of Gujarat, a western part of India, who devote themselves to the Hindu goddess *Bahucharā*. Generally, hijras are believed to live in a state of ‘de-regulation or anomy’ [Durkheim 1952: 253]. Most hijras are born and raised as physiological males, but they subsequently renounce their masculinity through various methods, including transvestism and castration. Moreover, they sever their kin relationships and abandon obligations attached to them, in other words, they renounce their own position in the family, caste and even society. Hijras are often deliberately kept away by laypeople with contempt and fear; however, they willingly facilitate cooperation and formation of relationships with laypeople at key junctures such as childbirth where laypeople stop abiding by daily rules and come into a state of ‘anomy,’ and have to withstand vulnerabilities that accompany such a state. In short, hijras are renouncers who live ‘outside-the-world’ [Dumont 1980], but they seek to interact with laypeople, in particular, those who are in danger of vulnerability.

In the following sections, I will first provide a brief account of how hijras have been represented in the academic literature. Then, I will illustrate how hijras are treated and regarded by the people of Gujarat, and how they form communities through existing kinship systems. Finally, by using observations gained during my fieldwork, I will examine what I describe as the anomic events of childbirth and the consequent ritual pollution as the key intersection between hijras and laypeople.

2. Construction of the ‘third gender’ category

Hijras have been represented as sexually abnormal or anomalous since the colonial era. Documents from this period depict hijras as hermaphrodites or disgusting objects [Forbes 1834: 359], and impotent men who became eunuchs [Kirparam 1901: 506–7]. In post-colonial contexts, they have been represented as institutionalized homosexuals [Carstairs 1956], a eunuch community [Mukherjee 1980], and transvestite eunuchs [Jani and Rosenberg 1990]. Gender studies literature, however, has praised the deviant aspects of hijras, regarding them as the embodiment of non-Western societies’ ‘third sex’ or ‘third gender’. In this context, hijras are positioned as the counterparts to Western sexual minorities.

Serena Nanda, a prominent contributor to scholarly literature on the third gender, published a book, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, in 1990. Her ethnography focused on the lives of hijras living as a de-humanized group, an approach that was highly appreciated by academics [e.g., Reddy 2005]. Moreover, Nanda claimed that hijras use ‘the alternative gender roles’ of traditional Indian culture to synthesize a third gender image, and presented this as a pan-Indian phenomenon. Nanda made this assertion in order to argue the necessity of discarding the Western gender dichotomy in favour of gender diversity [Nanda

1996; 1999].

Locally, however, the third gender does not exist as a consistent social niche. Furthermore, the term 'hijra' does not refer to a single uniform group across all of India. Rather, each region uses different indigenous terms to refer to people otherwise generally understood as hijra, such as *fātadā*, *vyāndhala*, *hījadā* and *pāvaiyā* in the case of Gujarat. Just as the names of these groups vary by region, so do their community structures and individual circumstances.

3. Hijras of Gujarat and childbirth

Consistent with Nanda's description, most Indian people regard hijras as neither men nor women; however, this does not equate to the assignment of a third gender. Hijras renounce their responsibilities for perpetuating patrilineal lines and leave their hometowns to live with hijra gurus. In so doing, they lose their position in the family, caste, and even society as a whole. Many even renounce their gender status through castration, underscoring their conviction that they are no longer worldly persons. Though they look and dress like women, they do not share the status of women in mainstream society; rather, they stand at the border of gender categories.

In this section, I will illustrate how vastly hijras' situations can differ in rural and urban areas, showing that hijras do not exist as a fixed category, but instead have an ambiguous status that enables them to fluidly adapt to multiple boundaries such as pilgrimage places between the sacred and profane, and liminal conditions such as childbirth.

1) Hijras standing at pilgrimage places

According to mainstream family and gender norms, hijras are deviants living on the periphery of society. However, this alienation does not necessarily lead to discrimination. For example, 88 kilometres away from the nearest city (Ahmedabad), in a village near the temple of the goddess Bahucharā, about 10 hijras live self-sufficiently and get on well with their neighbours. Every morning, they meet at the temple and wait for pilgrims. Pilgrims walk a specific circuit in the temple in order to reach the goddess's room and receive her grace (*āshīrvāda*) through eye contact. After leaving the goddess, the pilgrims wind around the compound, eventually encountering hijras sitting cross-legged on the ground. Some pilgrims are wary of encountering strangers, but most willingly approach hijras to receive their grace (and, by proxy, the goddess's grace) through physical contact, leaving a small monetary donation in return.

This religious donation to hijras is usually referred to as '*dāna*', a Sanskrit word meaning an irrevocable gift.¹ The practice of *dāna* is believed to contribute to an accumulation of good deeds that can lead to wealth and happiness in future incarnations. From the point of view of market exchange, some might regard this gift as '*daksina*', a payback for *āshīrvāda*,

yet hijras do not regard this gift as a direct, reciprocal transaction. Rather, they claim that the Goddess uses pilgrims as vehicles to deliver money to hijras. According to J. Parry's ethnography on funeral priests in Benares, *dāna* is a gift that contains the sins or evils of donors. Therefore, it is dangerous for priests to receive *dāna* [Parry 1994]. Hijras, however, do not share this idea, nor do they believe they are personally receiving gifts from pilgrims, as hijras regard their role in the temple as anonymous intermediary between pilgrim and deity, rather than individual personalities. Along with their gender ambiguity, this anonymous orientation strengthens their position as a devotee of the Goddess at the pilgrimage site, and avoids creating any obligations and personal connections to pilgrims.

2) Hijras' roles at childbirth

Hijras experience different circumstances in urban areas than in rural settings. In the city of Ahmedabad, hijras are infamous for loitering in the streets and occasionally flinging dirt at passers-by. Nevertheless, they operate unhindered in mainstream society. For example, a few weeks before New Years' Day, hijras go door-to-door, blessing businesses in exchange for money. Additionally, whenever hijras hear of a birth or marriage, they go to the family's house to bless them through song and dance, demanding money and gifts from the head of the family in return. Heads of families, at such a pivotal occasions in life, are happy to pay hijras for this service; in fact, they expect the visit as a matter of custom. In



1. Hijras and pilgrims at the temple of Bahuchara

¹ Although the term is ancient, *dāna* as it is practiced today is not; its meanings and intentions were transformed by the concept of charity during the colonial era [see Kasturi 2010].

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2. Hijras of Ahmedabad city, having a break from their activities

short, hijras become acceptable and understandable to those experiencing crucial transitional events.

3) Childbirth and pollution

This is particularly true of those who have a new-born baby and require luck and *āshīrvāda* to forestall future suffering. The house of a family that has recently experienced a birth or death generally has to observe a customary period of confinement. This phenomenon is called *sutak* or *valdi* in Gujarati, often translated as ritual pollution in English. When *sutak* or *valdi* has come to a house after childbirth, the mother and her baby are confined to the home, and family members restrict their daily activities. In other words, all family members are required to re-regulate themselves through several taboos in order to get out of anomy. They cannot attend any auspicious events, nor visit temples.

When examining the relationship between childbirth and ritual pollution, many believe the association is literal, in that new mothers exude lochia (postnatal vaginal discharge), a 'dirty', polluting element. However, this association would not apply to a woman's first birth. According to Gujarati custom, a woman's first child must be delivered at her parents' house; in this case, one might assume that, since the presence of lochia would be limited to the maternal grandparents' home, the effects of *sutak* would be restricted to that house as well. However, contrary to this expectation, it is believed that the act of childbirth would bring more powerful *sutak* to the husband's house, despite the absence of lochia. This suggests that the phenomenon of *sutak* or *valdi* has nothing to do with literal dirt or pollution, but

rather with the birth itself, specifically the baby's ambiguous or liminal state. Furthermore, it indicates that sutak might be better understood as a period of great vulnerability, stemming from anomy, where a new family member provokes the fear of death.

Until a baby is six days old, it is believed to occupy a dangerous position, standing at the threshold between this world and the other. On the sixth day, the goddess determines the baby's fate [Pocock 1972, 116]. After this point, the child is considered as destined to remain in this world. Correspondingly, the level of sutak decreases just after the sixth day's ritual, confirming that this concept indicates a liminal and dangerous situation, rather than literal dirt. The state of sutak or valdi continues for about one month (37 days, according to the Hindu calendar). During this time, the baby and mother stay at home. The baby's father and his family also have to restrict their everyday routines; in fact, the husband's side of the family is actually responsible for overcoming sutak, as the baby is perceived as belonging to the husband's line. Moreover, neighbours cannot visit the house for fear that sutak will be transferred through physical contact. Hijras are the only guests who can visit during this delicate time.

4. Fieldwork with hijras in Gujarat

In this section, I will describe how hijras and laypeople interact during crises, particularly during the time of sutak or valdi. Before recounting a sutak situation I observed, I will describe how I began my fieldwork and formed relationships with hijras in Gujarat.

1) The familial hijra community

Hijras in Gujarat are divided into two communities, '*pāvaiyā*' and '*hījada*'. Members of both communities give blessings to laypeople in the name of the goddess Buhachara, but do not observe the same religious customs. For example, when holding a funeral for a member of the community, *pāvaiyā* hijras observe Hindu customs, while *hījada* hijras observe customs similar to Muslim rituals.

In 2002, I began working and living with two *pāvaiyā* hijras, Diviya and Sunita,² who live near the temple of Bahucharā. Diviya is a *guru*, which gives her the authority to deliver orders to Sunita, her '*chelo*', or a disciple. In hijra communities, the guru-chela relationship is equivalent to that of a parent and child, implying that, when Diviya dies, Sunita has the right to succeed Diviya and inherit her property; she will also be expected to give Diviya a proper funeral. The guru-chela relationship can also be interpreted as that of a husband and wife, implying a sexual relationship. It was true of the case between Sunita and Diviya. When

² I have provided false names to protect the subjects' anonymity. As they have female names, I use female pronouns for consistency.

they were younger, they used to share one bed and have sexual intercourse at night.

Diviya previously had three other disciples, but all of them left the house following a quarrel with Sunita. In 2007, two new members joined Diviya's house, but as Sunita's chelas, not Diviya's. These disciples referred to Diviya as '*dadi*' (Gujarati for 'grandmother'). Having established a good relationship with Diviya and Sunita, I stayed at their house when visiting Bahuchara's temple. As our relationship deepened, Diviya came to regard me as Sunita's sister; thereafter, Sunita's new disciples referred to me as '*fai*', meaning a father's or guru's sister.

As of August 2007, two other members of the local hijra community lived in the residential area adjacent to the temple, while three other members lived outside the area in nearby villages. Every morning, these five members and four members from Diviya's house gather and begin their work on the temple grounds. Occasionally, other hijras from more distant locations also come to the temple, particularly on days when many pilgrims are expected to visit.

One of Diviya's ex-disciples, Jaya, often came to the temple from Ahmedabad and would stay at Diviya's house for a couple of days. Although Jaya no longer had guru-chela ties with Diviya, they were still on good terms. Jaya also treated me as Diviya's daughter and invited me to her house, which was located in the middle of Ahmedabad's old city.

2) Hijra life in Ahmedabad

The Sultan Ahmed Shah founded the city of Ahmedabad along the Sabarmati River in 1411. The town expanded toward the east side of the river, developing into a walled city by 1580 [Pandya 2002, 84]. The west side of the river was not developed until the completion of the Ellis Bridge in 1892. Because of this, the east side of the city is usually called the 'old city'.

Jaya was born and raised in the old city. Her house was located among the densely packed row of houses inside the walled city, near one of its twelve gates. When Jaya lived as a man, he married a woman at his father's behest, but the marriage soon crumbled. After his parents passed away, he decided to become a hijra, and underwent surgical castration. Diviya, her first guru and a member of the pāvaiyā community, gave her the female name of Jaya. Although guru-chela relationships are supposed to develop in one place, Jaya stayed on with her brother and sister in Ahmedabad, rather than living with Diviya.

Jaya's second guru, Saya, belongs to the hījadā community, located within the walled city. They are divided into five groups, and are known to play drums when dancing for blessings. Saya, Jaya, and other group members meet at seven in the morning near a jewellery shop in the bazaar and then go on duty until the afternoon.

3) Hijras' encounters with *sutak*

When I first visited Jaya on 28th February 2005, she had just returned home from her



3. A view of densely packed row of houses, Ahmedabad

rounds. Jaya and her brother lived together on the ground floor of a three-storey house, and rented rooms on the first and second floors to other families. Her tenants referred to her by her former male name, Jayesh, suggesting they have known each other for a long time.

Once she finished her household tasks, Jaya usually went out without any particular purpose. On my first visit, Jaya and I were heading for the market area when a woman approached her and asked, 'Where have you been lately?' She had been urgently looking for Jaya following the recent birth of two babies.³ Jaya was very pleased to hear this, and we immediately headed toward the childbirth houses as fast as we could. If other hijras found the house before Jaya, she might have lost the chance to bless the baby and receive money. Fortunately, she was the first to arrive.

As soon as she arrived at the house of the first birth, she asked some nearby women whether the baby was born in the house. The lady of the house came out to tell Jaya that the baby had just been born that day, and mother and child were still in hospital. She invited Jaya in and offered her a glass of water, a common way to welcome a guest. Jaya refused,

³ This incident made me realize that loitering in the streets was a useful way for Jaya to receive job leads from neighbours.

stating, 'the valdi has come to your house'. In this situation, water may contain a portion of the house's sutak, hence Jaya's refusal.

Since mother and child were still in hospital, Jaya told the lady she would return in 10 days to play with the baby. In a sutak situation, cuddling and dandling the baby is believed to eliminate any evil and suffering the baby might have carried over from its previous life. Before leaving the house, Jaya asked the lady of the house for some money for good luck. She also made sure to leave her mark on the door with chalk, to show other hijras that she was first on the scene. Once she returned, she would receive more money and gifts.

At the second childbirth house, we saw a mother and a 15-day-old baby. Jaya did not play with the baby, but instead touched its face with her hand and told me to do the same. I did not expect to be allowed to touch a new-born baby, as there was still a risk of sutak, though markedly less since the crucial six-day mark some days prior. I queried this later when I returned to Jaya's house. One of Jaya's tenants, a woman, replied, 'they (hijras) are allowed to touch, but we are not'. This short remark illustrates the difference between hijras and laypeople; even though the tenant shared the same space as Jaya, she recognised that they do not live by the same rules.

As hijras are regarded as residents of the liminal sphere, Jaya was able to operate easily in a liminal neonatal space, unlike laypeople. However, she still observed the rule of sutak by refusing to drink water in a childbirth house. Since Jaya was not a member of the family, she was not allowed to partake of the house's nourishment. As mentioned earlier, sutak refers to an anomic period of great vulnerability caused by receiving a new family member, overcome with his/her protectors, not with strangers. In this way, she shared a layperson's idea of sutak, despite operating separately from mainstream society. This enabled her to create a dedicated, ritualised space for interacting with strangers under sutak conditions.

Ultimately, hijras know that they would never be driven away at the time of sutak, even if they appear without notice, as new-borns in a state of liminal uncertainty require hijras' blessings to live a long, happy life. During sutak, laypeople are forced to temporarily adapt to anomic conditions so as to secure the assistance of hijras, the liminal beings.

4) Negotiating with laypeople

When I visited Jaya again in March 2009, she was in the process of negotiating re-entry into the pāvaiyā community after falling out with some hījadā members. She often criticized the hījadā style of begging when socialising with acquaintances, and told everyone she had parted ways with the community. As she had frequent requests for blessings, she was sure she could survive without the support of a group.

Since Jaya had no more obligations to hījadā members, she was able to take me around the walled city while I stayed at her home. On 5th March 2009, we visited three houses relatively close to Jaya's, inhabited by families whose sons had recently married. They accepted



4. Hijras chatting on the street and getting information, Ahmedabad



5. Hijras visiting a house where a child is born, Ahmedabad

Jaya's sudden visit without surprise, and prepared a plate of offerings containing rice or wheat, sugar or sweets, saris, and cash. Whenever she took a portion of grain, she always made sure to return some to the family as, if she emptied the grain box, she would not be invited back.

At the second house, Jaya sang and danced, and received 600 rupees in return. However,

she could not accept it, and demanded eleven rupees more. According to Jaya, hijras avoid the number six (*cha* in Gujarati) due to its relation to the word *chakko*, an offensive term for hijras. The number zero is also considered unfavourable, as are numbers in general during auspicious occasions. Therefore, monetary gifts require careful planning and modification to avoid attracting bad luck or causing offense.

Some newly married couples would ask Jaya for advice on fertility and conception. On 6 March 2009, one woman asked Jaya to assist her son and daughter-in-law, as they had been married for five months and had not yet conceived a child. The wife experienced irregular, coffee-coloured menses. Jaya advised her to eat particular foods such as a papaya during the first four days of her period in order to increase the level of heat in her body. Meanwhile, she advised the husband to eat almonds after brushing his teeth in the morning, and advised the couple to make sure to have sexual intercourse seven days after the wife's next period. Jaya also sometimes invited childless couples to her house to pray to Bahucharā together. Once her advice and prayers proved successful, Jaya would be asked to return to the families to give further blessings and receive grain and money in return.

5. Conclusion

According to mundane gender and family norms, hijras are deviant, as they have no position in their family, caste, or society. Nor do they represent a third gender, as asserted by previous literature. Rather, hijras can be regarded as anonymous intermediaries who bridge the gaps between deity and ordinary people, or sacred and profane.

This ambiguity works in hijras' favour when dealing with strangers in a state of anomy, such as sutak of childbirth. Although sutak is usually translated as ritual pollution, it does not necessarily signify something dirty or untouchable. Rather, sutak works as an intersection where laypeople and strangers encounter in crisis and transition. Laypeople in a state of sutak become more open to embracing liminal beings because they are also standing at liminality between life and death; this increased receptivity to liminality creates a ritualised space for cooperation with strangers.

Though hijras are often relegated to the periphery of society, they as anonymous renouncers are able to guide laypeople in finding a way out of anomy, and help reinforce their connection to the divine. Rather than completely renouncing society, they exist in mutual symbiosis with laypeople, connected by shared liminal experiences.

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